

What Is Advaita or Nonduality?



What is Advaita, or nonduality? [Advaita](#) means [nondual](#) or "not two." This oneness is a fundamental quality of everything. Everything is a part of and made of one nondual consciousness. Often the question arises, "If it is all one thing, why don't I experience it that way?" This is confusing oneness for the appearance of sameness. Things can appear different without being separate. Just look at your hand for a moment. Your fingers are all different from each other, but are they separate? They all arise from the same hand. Similarly, the objects, animals, plants and people in the world are all definitely different in their appearance and functioning. But they are all connected at their source—they come from the same source. This one Being that is behind all life has an infinite number of different expressions that we experience as different objects.

To continue with the hand analogy, your fingers are all made of the same substance. They are made up of similar tissues, cells, atoms, and at the deepest level, subatomic particles. Similarly, when your experience of reality becomes more subtle, you discover that everything is just different expressions of one field of nondual Being. Below is a wonderful little story about the meaning and definition of nonduality or Advaita written by Dennis Waite (of [advaita.org.uk](#)) that explores this in more depth.

But what about your experience right now? Is it possible to realize this subtle oneness or nonduality in ordinary experience? It is, if you set aside the expectation of a dramatic awakening to the experience of [oneness](#) and explore the nondual nature of reality a little bit at a time. Just as even a single drop of water is wet, you can experience oneness in even simple everyday experiences, since oneness is a fundamental quality of everything that exists.

As an experiment, just notice your fingers and the palm of your hand. Can you say where one starts and the other ends, or are they one thing? To take this further, where does your hand stop and your forearm begin? Can you experience the oneness of your hand and your forearm? If these are not separate, then what about other parts of your body? Are your feet and your ears really one even though they are so different? Now notice if there really is a separation between your thoughts and your head. Where does your head stop and something else called thought begin? What about feelings or desires? Are they really separate from you or your body?

Now, notice the simple sensations you are having: the sounds you are hearing, the sensations of touch, and the objects and events you are seeing. If you are seeing something, where does the seeing stop and something else called the eye begin? If you are hearing sounds, where does the sound start and the ear stop? Perhaps the hearing, the sound, and your ear are all one thing. Yes, the ear is different from the sound, but in the act of hearing, they become one thing.

Then, where does the source of the sound stop and the sound itself start? For example, if a bird is singing outside your window, where does the bird stop and the sound of its song begin? Or are they one thing? If the bird and its song are one thing, and your hearing and the song are one thing, then is it possible that you and the bird are also one thing?

Nondual consciousness is the natural state.

The Advaita truth of nondual consciousness, or oneness of Being, has often been thought of as something hidden or difficult to experience, when it is quite ordinary and available in every moment. Nondual consciousness is the natural state. Of course, a dramatic experience of oneness is a rare event. But why wait for something so rare when this sweet and satisfying oneness is right here, right now?

What is Advaita or Nonduality?

- by Dennis Waite

"So, Swami-ji, what would you say that Advaita is?" The eager young woman crossed her legs and sat expectantly, pencil poised above a pristine pad of paper.

"It simply means 'not two' - the ultimate truth is nondual," replied the Sage, reclining in a large and comfortable-looking armchair and not sitting in an upright lotus position, as he ought to have been, for the sake of the photograph that she had just taken, if nothing else.

She continued to wait for further elucidation before beginning to write but it soon became apparent that the answer had been given. "But is it a religion? Do you believe in God, for example?"

"Ah, well, that would depend upon what you mean by those words, wouldn't it?" he responded, irritatingly. "If, by 'religion', you mean does it have priests and churches and a band of followers who are prepared to kill non-believers, then the answer is no. If, on the other hand, you refer to the original, literal meaning of the word, namely to 'bind again', to reunite the mistaken person that we think we are with the Self that we truly are, then yes, it is a religion. Similarly, if by 'God' you mean a separate, supernatural being who created the universe and will reward us by sending us to heaven if we do what He wants, then the answer is no. If you use the term in the sense of the unmanifest, non-dual reality, then yes, I most certainly do believe in God."

The pencil raced across the paper, recording the answer for the benefit of the magazine's readers but, as the words clashed with previous ideas in her memory, the lack of a clear resolution of her questions was reflected by an increasing puzzlement in her expression.

He registered this with compassion and held out his hand towards her. "Give me a piece of paper from your pad." She looked up, mouth slightly open as she wondered why he could possibly want that. But she turned the pad over, carefully tore off the bottom sheet and placed it in his outstretched hand. He turned to the table at his right and deftly began to fold and refold the paper. After a few moments, he turned back and, before she had had time to see what he had done, he held the paper aloft and launched it into the air. It rose quickly and circled gracefully around the room before losing momentum and diving to meet a sudden end when its pointed nose hit a sauce bottle on the dining table. "Could you bring it back over here do you think?" he asked.

"So, what would you say that we have here?" he asked, as she handed it back to him.

"It's a paper aeroplane," she replied, with just a hint of questioning in her voice, since the answer was so obvious that she felt he must have some other purpose in mind.

"Really?" he responded and, in an instant, he screwed up the object and, with a practised, over-arm movement, threw it effortlessly in a wide arc, from which it landed just short of the waste paper basket in the corner of the room. "And now?" he asked.

"It's a screwed-up ball of paper", she said, without any doubt in her voice this time.

"Could you bring it back again, please", he continued. She did so, wondering if this was typical of such an interview, spending the session chasing about after bits of paper like a dog running after a stick. He took the ball and carefully unfolded it, spread it out on the table and smoothed his hand over it a few times before handing it back to her. "And now it is just a sheet of paper again," he said, "although I'm afraid it's a bit crumpled now!"

He looked at her, apparently anticipating some sign of understanding if not actual revelation but none was forthcoming. He looked around the room and, after a moment, he stood up, walked over to the window and removed a rose from a vase standing in the alcove. Returning to his seat, he held the rose out to her and asked, "What is this?"

She was feeling increasingly embarrassed as it was clear he was trying to explain something fundamental, which she was not understanding. Either that or he was mad or deliberately provoking her, neither of which seemed likely, since he remained calm and open and somehow intensely present. "It's a flower," she replied eventually.

He then deliberately took one of the petals between his right-hand thumb and fore-finger and plucked it. He looked at her and said, "And now?" She didn't reply, though it seemed that this time he didn't really expect an answer. He continued to remove the petals one by one until none remained, looking up at her after each action. Finally, he pulled the remaining parts of the flower head off the stem and dropped them onto the floor, leaving the bare stalk, which he held out to her. "Where is the flower now?" he asked. Receiving no reply, he bent down and picked up all of the petals, eventually displaying them in his open hand. "Is this a flower?" he asked.

She shook her head slowly. "It was a flower only when all of the petals and the other bits were all attached to the stem."

"Good!" he said, appreciatively. "Flower is the name that we give to that particular arrangement of all of the parts. Once we have separated it into its component parts, the flower ceases to exist. But was there ever an actual, separate thing called 'flower'? All of the material that constituted the original form is still here in these parts in my hand.

"The paper aeroplane is an even simpler example. There never was an aeroplane was there? And I don't just mean that it was only a toy. There was only ever paper. To begin with, the paper was in the form of a flat sheet for writing on. Then, I folded it in various ways so that it took on an aerodynamic shape which could fly through the air slowly. The name that we give to that form is 'aeroplane'. When I screwed it up, the ball-shape could be thrown more accurately. 'Aeroplane' and 'ball' were names relating to particular forms of the paper but at all times, all that ever actually existed was paper.

"Now, this sort of analysis applies to every 'thing' that you care to think of. Look at that table over there and this chair on which you are sitting. What are they made of? You will probably say that they are wooden chairs?"

He looked at her questioningly and she nodded, knowing at the same time that he was going to contradict her. "Well, they are made of wood certainly, but that does not mean that they are wooden chairs! On the contrary, I would say that this, that you are sitting on, is actually chairy wood, and that object over there is tably wood. What do you say to that?"

"You mean that the thing that we call 'chair' is just a name that we give to the wood when it is that particular shape and being used for that particular function?" she asked, with understanding beginning to dawn.

"Exactly! I couldn't have put it better myself. It is quite possible that I could have a bag full of pieces of wood that can be slotted together in different ways so that at one time I might assemble them into something to sit upon, another time into something to put food upon and so on. We give the various forms distinct names and we forget that they are ONLY names and forms and not distinct and separate things.

"Look - here's an apple," he said, picking one out of the bowl on the table and casually tossing it from one hand to the other before holding it up for her to examine. "It's round or to be more accurate, spherical; its reddish in colour and it has", he sniffed it, "a fruity smell. No doubt if I were to bite into it, I would find it juicy and sweet.

"Now all of these - round, red, fruity, juicy, sweet - are adjectives describing the noun 'apple.' Or, to use more Advaitic terms, let me say that the 'apple' is the 'substantive' - the apparently real, separately existing thing - and all of the other words are 'attributes' of the apple - merely incidental qualities of the thing itself. Are you with me so far?"

She nodded hesitantly but, after a little reflection, more positively.

"But suppose I had carried out this analysis with the rose that we looked at a moment ago. I could have said that it was red, delicate, fragrant, thorny and so on. And we would have noted that all of those were simply attributes and that the actual existent thing, the substantive, was the rose. But then we went on to see that the rose wasn't real at all. It was just an assemblage of petals and sepals and so on - I'm afraid I am not a botanist! In the same way, we could say that the apple consists of seeds and flesh and skin. We may not be able to put these things together into any form different from an apple but Nature can.

"If you ask a scientist what makes an apple an apple, he will probably tell you that is the particular configuration of nucleotides in the DNA or RNA of the cells. There are many different species of apple and each one will have a slight variation in the chromosomes and it is that which differentiates the species. If you want to explain to someone what the difference is between a Bramley and a Granny Smith, you will probably say something like 'the Bramley is large and green, used mainly for cooking and is quite sharp tasting, while the Granny Smith is still green but normally much smaller and sweeter'. But these are all adjectives or attributes. What is actually different is the physical makeup of the cell nuclei.

"But, if we look at a chromosome or a strand of DNA, are we actually looking at a self-existent, separate thing? If you look very closely through an electron microscope, you find that DNA is made up of four basic units arranged in pairs in a long, spiral chain. And any one of these units is itself made up of atoms of carbon, hydrogen, oxygen and nitrogen, again arranged in a very specific way. So even those are not separate 'things-in-themselves'; they are names given to particular forms of other, more fundamental things.

"And so we arrive at atoms - even the ancient Greeks used to think that everything was made up of atoms. Are these the final 'substantives' with all of the apparent things in the world being merely attributes? Well, unfortunately not. Science has known for a long time that atoms mainly consist of empty space with electrons spinning around a central nucleus of protons and neutrons. And science has known for somewhat less time that these particles, which were once thought to be fundamental, are themselves not solid, self-existent things but are either made up of still smaller particles or are in the form of waves, merely having probabilities of existence at many different points in space.

"Still more recently, science claimed that all of the different particles are themselves made out of different combinations of just a few particles called quarks and that those are the ultimately existing things. But they have not yet progressed far enough. The simple fact of the matter is that every 'thing' is ultimately only an attribute, a name and form superimposed upon a more fundamental substantive. We make the mistake of thinking that there really is a table, when actually there is only wood. We make the mistake of thinking that there is really

wood, when actually there is only cellulose and sugars and proteins. We make the mistake of thinking there is protein when this is only a particular combination of atoms. "Ultimately, everything in the universe is seen to be only name and form of a single substantive.

The journalist was transfixed; not exactly open-mouthed but her pencil had not moved for some time. Eventually, she asked in a small voice: "But then where do I fit into all of this?"

"Ah", he replied. "That again depends upon what you mean by the word 'I'. Who you think you are - 'Sarah' - is essentially no different from the table and chair. You are simply name and form, imposed upon the non-dual reality. Who you really are, however... well, that is quite different - you are that nondual reality. You see, in the final analysis, there are not two things; there is only nonduality. That is the truth; that is Advaita." (by Dennis Waite)

The Meaning or Definition of Advaita, Oneness or Nonduality

Advaita is the teaching of nonduality, which has become best known in the West through the nondual spiritual teachings of the revered Indian saint, Ramana Maharshi. He taught that self-realization, or the realization of the oneness of who we are, is not some distant goal that only a few can attain. The Self is that which is always and already present, that which doesn't come and go. The love, peace, and happiness we have all been seeking is already here and is, in fact, who we are. Through simple self-inquiry, we can awaken from the dream of a separate self to the reality of Oneness, to the spiritual truth of who we are as **nondual consciousness**.

About Nondual Spiritual Teacher, Nirmala:

[Advaita](#) spiritual teacher, Nirmala has been offering [spiritual teaching](#) and nondual [spiritual mentoring](#) in the U.S. and internationally since 1998. Nirmala offers a unique vision and a gentle, compassionate approach, which adds to the rich tradition of inquiry into our true nature. He is the author of several books about **nonduality**, including *Nothing Personal: Seeing Beyond the Illusion of a Separate Self*, and *Living from the Heart*. In his books and mentoring sessions Nirmala points to the wisdom within each of us, and fosters the individual's own redognition of their true nature as nondual consciousness. [Free ebook downloads](#) of several of Nirmala's Advaita books are available on this [page](#).

About Dennis Waite and Advaita.org

Dennis Waite has been a student of **Advaita Vedanta** and **nonduality** for over 20 years and maintains one of the most visited websites on the subject. He is the present Chief Moderator of the Advaitin group and has published several nondual books, including *The Book of One* and, more recently, *Back to the Truth: 5000 Years of Advaita*. For information about the books, visit www.advaita.org.uk.